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ABSTRACT

Charter schools grant significantly more autonomy to their principals than do traditional public schools. This report examines how eight Massachusetts charter-school principals deal with autonomy in five areas: teacher hiring, budgetary control, instruction and curriculum, organizational design, and accountability. The freedom to hire their own teachers was seen as very important by principals. Controlling the school budget is seen as valuable, but charter principals say they spend a lot of time looking at how to cut costs. Most of the principals turned to charter schools out of frustration with the limitations they encountered in the traditional public-school system, and view their new sense of freedom and ability to create a school environment as the best parts of leading charter schools. The author concludes that charter principals are using the freedom granted to them to create schools that would not be possible if the charter law did not exist. It is too soon to judge whether charter schools will drive real improvements in education; this will depend on the ability of charter schools to capture the energy of entrepreneurs by constantly changing, to cultivate new sources, and to attract leaders who know how to use freedom to produce better results. (RT)

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Autonomy and Innovation

How Do Massachusetts Charter School Principals Use Their Freedom?

by

Bill Triant

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Executive Summary

Charter schools grant significant autonomy to their principals, but do their principals make decisions that would not be possible in ordinary schools? Are they creating schools that are truly different from (and potentially better than) regular district schools? For this report, Bill Triant conducted extended interviews with eight charter school principals in Massachusetts to shed light on how they use their autonomy.

This report examines how charter principals deal with autonomy in five areas: teacher hiring, budgetary control, instruction and curriculum, organizational design, and accountability. The freedom to hire their own teachers was seen as very important by principals; they search for go-getters who fit their school's mission. Controlling the school budget is seen as valuable, too, but charter principals say they spend a lot of precious time looking at how to cut costs. While they are eager to take advantage of their freedom to develop innovative instructional programs, some feel that their autonomy is limited by the requirement that all students must take the statewide Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) exam, which tests mastery of the material covered by the state's academic standards.

Most of the principals turned to charter schools out of frustration with the limitations they encountered in the traditional public school system, and they view their new sense of freedom and ability to create a school environment as the best parts of leading charter

schools. The author concludes that charter principals are using the freedom granted to them to create schools that would not be possible if the charter law did not exist. It is too soon to judge whether charter schools will drive real improvements in education; this will depend on the ability of charter schools to capture the energy of entrepreneurs by constantly changing, to cultivate new resources, and to attract leaders who know how to use freedom to produce better results.

Bill Triant is a former math and entrepreneurship teacher in the Boston Public Schools. He is now pursuing a dual master's degree in education and business at Stanford, and looks forward to a career in education administration. He can be reached at triant_william@gsb.stanford.edu.

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Introduction

Charter schools, in the ideal, take power away from malfunctioning education bureaucracies and place it in the hands of those who are closest to, and who often care most, about students. Although charter school supporters are often strange bedfellows—conservatives favoring local control over big government, progressives seeking uplift in urban communities, disillusioned public school veterans, and renegade education reformers alike—most stand behind the idea that educational decisions are made better by teachers and principals than by distant bureaucrats.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of charter schools as compared to regular district schools is the significant autonomy granted to their principals. Depending on the laws of the state, charter principals and directors are given control over many aspects of school management, including teacher hiring and firing, budgeting, curriculum design, and scheduling. But just as laws that grant freedom of enterprise mean nothing without capable and motivated entrepreneurs creating companies, charter school laws will matter little without principals who are ready and willing to use increased autonomy to design an outstanding school.

This paper explores two questions: Is the additional decision-making authority that laws grant to charter principals enough to create schools that are truly different from (and potentially better than) regular district schools? Are principals in fact using their autonomy to make managerial decisions that would not be possible in regular schools? It is important to find out whether charter principals see increased managerial opportunities in their autonomy—opportunities that can truly transform schools. If charter school

principals are not making special decisions with their autonomy, then we cannot expect any special performance from charter schools.

America has waited with bated breath to see whether charter schools can outperform regular public schools. This question is important, but it is too early for an answer. We must first determine whether charter school leaders are using their autonomy to develop schools that are different, and then judge whether these new schools offer something better than traditional public schools.

The paper is based on extended interviews with eight charter school leaders in Massachusetts. Although state-by-state variations in charter law make generalizations difficult, Massachusetts is a good place to study charter schools for two reasons: The state has a relatively developed charter system, since its charter law was passed in 1993, and the state grants charter schools genuine fiscal autonomy (according the Center for Education Reform, which evaluates state charter laws). Massachusetts has, however, recently passed laws that limit charter school autonomy somewhat. For example, a law passed in 2000 required that all charter school teachers pass the state teacher certification test.

The law also increased the number of charter schools that could be created in the state, but it raised the percentage of charters reserved for "Horace Mann" charter schools (sometimes known as conversion schools), which are jointly established by the state Department of Education, the local school committee, and the local teachers union. The state will now allow the creation of up to 120 charter schools, but 48 of the charters (40% of the total) are now reserved for Horace Mann schools, leaving 72 for Commonwealth charter schools, which are established solely by the state Department of Education and

are thus subject to fewer regulations. Before the new law was passed, only 50 charter schools were allowed statewide, and 26% of the charters were reserved for Horace Mann schools.

Although the eight leaders interviewed for this paper have different titles—principal, director, head of school—an effort was made to interview the person who made most of the day-to-day managerial decisions at the school. In one case, a chairman of the board of trustees who had been actively involved in the management of the school was interviewed. For the sake of simplicity, the term "principal" will be used in this paper to characterize all of the interviewees.

The principals interviewed here come from a wide range of schools. Five serve urban students, three serve rural students, two are high schools, two are middle schools, two are middle-high school hybrids, and two are elementary-middle hybrids. Five of the schools scored higher on the MCAS than district schools that serve similar student populations, two scored about the same, and the scores for the eighth were unavailable. Seven were Commonwealth charter schools, and one was a Horace Mann charter school. One was operated by Edison Schools, Inc, and two were affiliated with universities. Although many of the principals did not mind if their names were used, each was promised anonymity to encourage uninhibited discussion of the issues.

The interviews sought to explore the extent to which these principals take advantage of the freedom granted to them by charter status in creating their desired school environment and achieving their desired educational goals. Each charter school leader was asked to discuss the greatest and worst parts of running a charter school, then queried about the extent to which they had taken advantage of the managerial autonomy

that the charter law afforded them. Although occasional prompts were given, the principals were encouraged to speak about what they found to be most important. Four of the eight leaders had formerly been principals of regular district schools, so they were asked to describe the differences between their experiences in the two environments.

This investigation is exploratory in nature and small in scale—no effort is made to generalize about the practices of charter schools—but the comments of these charter principals are nonetheless illuminating. They show us whether we can reasonably expect some charter schools to perform differently from regular district schools in the future. They also suggest ways in which charter school laws can be improved. Finally, they shed light on the skills, qualities, and motivations that are needed for strong charter school leadership—all of which must be cultivated as we consider how to develop the next generation of charter school leaders.

Why They Entered Charter Schools

Charter laws give school leaders a large and varied palette from which they can design a school. The choices these leaders make when designing their schools are often closely related to their past experiences and their reasons for wanting to work in a charter school in the first place.

Of the four principals with experience in district schools, three led schools in Massachusetts and one in New Hampshire and Connecticut. Of the remaining four, two were former teachers, one a community health expert, and one a professor of education policy.

All but two of the leaders explained their decision to accept their current charter position as an outgrowth of some dissatisfaction with their experience in district schools. "As a public school teacher, I failed to change the system from within as I once thought I could," one explained. Another commented: "When I was teaching [in a district school], I thought 'it just doesn't have to be like this.'" One principal who had formerly run a well-funded suburban school remarked: "I realized that it wasn't about the resources [in the regular district school]...it was about the mindset and people's resistance to change. I responded to an ad in *Ed Week* about a charter school where I could fire and hire, where I could create an innovative curriculum. The theory is, if you were to start from scratch you can get it right." Two other former principals also mentioned the lack of autonomy in regular district schools as a reason for their moves to charter schools.

One principal acknowledged that he made more money in the charter school, and said that he felt that there was no upward mobility in his former district without political connections. Another principal had no public school experience whatsoever, and decided to become a charter school principal because she didn't need to be certified to do so.

One of the principals was negatively disposed toward the idea of charter schools. She wanted to a run a school for a special segment of the population with a special need—a need that "couldn't be addressed by regular public schools." "Although charter schools are a drain on public education," she said, "people view us as benevolent because we have different kids."

The Joys and Perils of Running a Charter School

When asked what they felt were the best and worst parts of running a charter school, some of the principals commented on specific items—one said the greatest part was that there were "no teachers unions and no teachers union contracts," and another appreciated "the ability to make financial decisions quickly"—but most focused on less tangible matters relating to the spirit of charter schools.

The greatest part of running charter schools, several principals believe, is the sense of freedom. "The best part is the ability to create, and to see the creation turn into something wonderful," one remarked. Another saw the best part as the "ability to effect positive student change without being part of a district that discourages being entrepreneurial and being innovative." Yet another explained:

> It's not just the specific things like getting the financial allotment and deciding exactly where it's going to go or choosing your school building and constructing it in a way that you see fit. I'll tell you one thing. When I first started, I would have thought it was the specific things. But now in retrospect one of the biggest things is, for lack of a better word, the zeitgeist of a charter school. It's that you are starting with a blank slate. And it's this feeling of a mission of people coming together and delivering on a promise, like telling parents that there will be 20 kids in class, that there will be a safe environment, that if you get in trouble there will be a consequence.

Others identified the act of creating a school environment as the greatest part of charter schools: One said that being a charter school principal is "being part of a vibrant education community where all your colleagues are striving toward excellence and providing excellent education to students who have historically not received excellent education." Another said that in a charter school "students become a member of a

community, and it's magic—many schools are way too large and they are run from the top down and people aren't invested in them."

Remarks about the worst part of running charter schools were varied. Two principals said that there was nothing bad about charter schools. One regretted the lack of money for facilities, another the long hours he had to put in, and another the fact that charter schools drain public school resources. Three of the principals, however, expressed a fear that charter schools in Massachusetts are becoming more and more regulated. One brought up the recent law that requires teachers to have passed a teacher certification test, and said that her greatest fear was that "charter schools will have so many regulations put on them that they will not look any different from system schools." (Nearly all the principals commented on this law at some point in their interview.) Another described the regulation process as "a gradual nickeling and diming that will take away our freedom," and another said "the worst part of the charter school is the bureaucracy that has already happened in the public schools has already started to infringe on us."

The Nuts and Bolts of Charter School Management

Under Massachusetts law, Commonwealth charter schools are different from regular district schools in several key respects: They may hire any teacher who has passed the state teacher certification test, they are financed on a per-student basis and given large discretion over how to use their financing, they have some curricular freedom (although their students are required to take the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System [MCAS]), they are governed by a board of trustees which is

accountable to the state Board of Education, and their enrollment is determined by parents who choose to send their children to the school.

Few of the principals named one of these specific organizational features when asked about the greatest part of running a charter school. Is there something more to a charter school than the sum of these operational and organizational features? Does the "zeitgeist" of a charter school come from the combination of these features, or have these schools developed a culture of their own beyond their organizational mechanics?

The following sections examine five distinctive features of charter schools—teacher hiring, budgetary control, instruction and curriculum, organizational design, and accountability—and show how principals are dealing with them and, in many cases, taking advantage of them to manage their schools effectively. At the end of the section are examples in which principals describe using charter school autonomy to realize an overarching educational goal for his or her school.

Teacher Hiring

All but one of the principals believed that the system of teacher hiring in their charter school is better than the system in comparable district schools. Their reasons, however, varied widely, and many focused on different aspects of the hiring process to explain how they had benefited from their autonomy.

Two of the principals clearly felt that the absence of certification requirements was the most important feature of the state charter law. One explained that only 25% of her teachers were certified through the system, and that this allowed her to hire teachers with advanced degrees in subjects besides education to meet her school's primary goal of

academic rigor. Another, a former district school principal, explained why she hadn't hired many certified teachers:

> Certification is a guarantee of nothing to me. It doesn't mean that they can teach. It just means that they have taken and passed—possibly with D's—certain courses, and been through some student teaching, but I have no idea of the quality of the mentor teacher. What I need to see is people who are highly intelligent, prestigious college background, articulate, they like kids. They know what it means to work on a team. They are visionaries of a sort that they understand the movement and the potential that it holds and that they want to be part of creating a school. People ask and I tell them "I don't care if you are certified."

Three others mentioned that they were generally more comfortable hiring certified teachers, but that occasionally it was helpful to have the option to hire uncertified teachers: In one case, this enabled the hiring of a local artist to be an art teacher, and in another case the hiring of two social workers to become special education teachers.

Two of the principals said that they had hired mostly certified teachers from districts near their school, yet they were confident that their teachers could significantly outperform those in the districts nearby. How could this be possible? One said that people often make a "creaming argument about charter schools for students"—that charter schools cream the students with parents who care about their education away from the district schools—but he felt that "a stronger creaming argument can be made for teachers." The teachers who want to work at his school are those "who want to come in at six and leave after six, who are willing to come to extra school events, who want to be on the ground floor creating processes and procedures for a school that will be around for a long time"—in other words, the best of public school teachers. The other principal, who had spent 30 years in the regular district school system, had a different reason for his teachers' performance: "There are better teachers in the public school system

percentage-wise than there are teachers in the charter school system. The problem is that those teachers in the public school system are being held under a thumb...no you can't do that, no, no, no, no, we can't work with that curriculum. There's a lot of no, no, no, because we have to do it in the same way in this building as in the other building. Does that leave the teacher with any autonomy? No." The increased autonomy that his teachers had, he said, enabled them to do more.

Two other principals felt that a better quality of teacher came to their schools than to comparable district schools. One said that because he expected more of teachers, he paid them more than the district did. Paradoxically, the other said that she expected more of her teachers and paid them less, a guarantee that those who took the job really were imbued with the mission of the school.

Several of the principals felt that the freedom they had in the search-and-interview process had enabled them to find teachers who would suit their school missions. One described a selection process that allowed her to evaluate candidates with diverse backgrounds and experiences: "We have a hiring process with phone screening by me and then they are interviewed by teachers and then they teach a sample lesson with students. These tell us (1) Can they interact with students? (2) Do they believe in the school philosophy? (3) Do they have mastery of subject matter?" Another said of the hiring process, "if you throw 1,000 pebbles out there, one of them is going to hit the right candidate." He appreciated the quickness of the process: "We get a resume, we call the number, and we can hire the person on the spot if we like them." One of the principals, a former district principal, found the hiring process to be more of a hassle than a freedom:

"Finding teachers has been a big problem—I've had to put two ads in the paper that cost $2,000 apiece."

Several of the interviews yielded comments about teachers unions and tenure. Five principals remarked on how they had been able to remove bad teachers with reasonable ease. Several used "at-will" contracts that could be easily terminated at the end of a year. Several also remarked on the possibility of holding after-school and lunch meetings without fearing that they were making teachers go outside their contract. One who had had a particularly difficult experience with unions as a former principal described his point of view:

> The whole business of slowing down the go-getters or making them feel like they are giving the administration too much is crazy. When you have kids' lives on the line, your attitude should be totally different. Teachers who see it that way appreciate being in charter schools because they realize that they have a much higher purpose than getting out the door in what I call blue collar fashion. The union encourages teachers to punch in in the morning and leave at the gong... teachers don't like to give more than the compensated amount of time to a kid.

Budgetary Control

Two conflicting strains emerged when principals were asked about control of their school budget: a proud feeling of ownership and decision-making power, but also anxiety over a constant tug-of-war with the bottom line.

Many principals saw the greatest benefit of budgetary control as the ability to make decisions promptly. One commented on how a decision was made two days in advance to go on a field trip, so they just reserved the bus and went. Another described a school project where all the students were asked what a charter school was. "The best answer,

one that is telling," he said "was a student who wrote 'At a charter school, if the principal wants to have a dance, we have a dance.'"

Other principals described how school-site budget control allowed them to spend money in more sensible ways. One remarked that "the decisions here are made by the people who are actually working with the kids every day—that's important." Another told the story of firing a school lunch caterer that was failing to bring lunch on time and promptly hiring a new one that provided better service. Another, who was a former district principal, remarked:

> Here you have to make some informed choices about where to spend in some critical areas. In the regular district school, you are allowed to hire a certain number of teachers and the salary of these teachers is determined by the central office from an amount that's mostly determined by the teachers union. If you want more teachers at regular school you can't just have them. I can decide how many teachers I can have and, based on an objective criterion, how much I can pay each one.

Although one of the principals felt that his budget was completely adequate, each of the seven others said that much of their time was spent looking at their expenditures and determining how to cut costs. Three viewed this process in a positive light—as an exercise in resourcefulness. "We are a lean organization," one said. "The director and principal don't have a secretary. Our mentality: If you want to get it done, then do it yourself. The biggest chunk of our budget is spent on salaries, and then supplies. We don't have that middle management level. We do cut corners, but we do so in a way not to affect the students but that we as teachers have to work really hard." Another told the story of how she involves teachers in the budgetary process: "I don't sit here and say this is what we are going to have to do with the budget. I would never make a decision

without bringing it to faculty. If I have to make a slash, I ask them what they value...do they value having teacher interns?" After meeting with the teachers, this principal determined that they did not need to make a new textbook purchase.

One former district school principal felt that charter schools should be praised for using money efficiently. She recounted a story about a time when she determined that her former (district) school could spend $1,000 on library supplies instead of $4,000. At a meeting with colleagues from other schools, she was told not to make the cut because she would never get the allotment again. "People are stonewalling their own cuts," she said. "It was so common for the district to go into deficit spending and then go to the taxpayers and say whoops, we need to have a special election and a special meeting to dig ourselves out of a hole with bonds or something. I always thought that that was blackmail. The public would have no choice, and most often the community just digs deeper into its pocket to cough up the money."

Several of the principals saw their tight budgets more as a source of anxiety than an opportunity for resourcefulness. Although five principals reported receiving grants, one remarked that there was too much competition and her school was too small to receive a grant. "I have the freedom, but not the resources," she said. She also commented that 14% of her budget pays for rent, an expense she never encountered as a district principal. One principal said that he had gone over budget, and that this became known by the faculty. "All of the teachers became nervous, and rumors started flying around the room that certain teachers would be laid off. Even the students got involved in the rumors."

One principal mentioned that her school had students from several different districts, and that the per-child financial allotment varied by as much as $3,000,

depending on which district the students came from. Furthermore, her school was not given any additional funds for students with special needs. She admitted that "we have to keep our fingers crossed when the results of that lottery come in." The arrival of a student with serious special needs could affect her budget by thousands of dollars.

Instruction and Curriculum

In Massachusetts law, the first two stated purposes of charter schools are "to stimulate the development of innovative programs within public education" and "to provide opportunities for innovative learning and assessment." Most of the principals seemed to have taken advantage of the freedom over instructional practice given to their schools. One of the schools had "a strong environmental mission where we have kids appreciate natural resources." Many of this school's projects focused on gathering environmental data and sending it to state offices for use. One of the schools had several classes on ethics and teen pregnancy geared toward the needs of the students. Another school established what was called a "kid lab"—a "science-art classroom like going to the museum of science and the children's museum and regular classroom all in one." Two schools mentioned that the hallmarks of their programs were academic rigor. Both were putting students on track for AP exams, and focusing on college admissions. One of the principals wanted a specific vocational emphasis in his school, but felt that he had never really been able to achieve it as he envisioned—that there was too much momentum for a typical high school program.

Like other public school students in Massachusetts, all charter school students are required to take the MCAS, a comprehensive exam that tests mastery of specific

academic standards that are outlined in curriculum frameworks that are ostensibly followed by all teachers. Charter schools are supposed to be autonomous concerning the means of instruction, yet highly accountable for what their students are learning—specifically, for the material covered by the MCAS. Several principals pointed out that their instructional autonomy is limited, even with such broad results-based accountability. One said of the curriculum frameworks: "They do give direction to curriculum. It's not bad to have them, but it is hard when you are a charter school and you have a mission that says that you are supposed to do certain things and then two years later the curriculum frameworks come into play and then you have to accommodate them because if you don't your kids may not do well on the MCAS." She told the story of an excellent social studies teacher who spent most of the first term on the concept of government, teaching *Lord of the Flies* rather than jumping into the details of U.S. history. By February, she said that it was an all-out race for him to cover all the material so his students wouldn't suffer on the MCAS. Another principal said that she had started to experiment with project-based learning when she took over the school. "This has been difficult since MCAS turned up the heat," she said. "I also wanted to have multi-age classrooms, but MCAS is making it difficult to do that and not mess up the sequence on which kids are going to be tested." Two of the principals—the same two that pointed to academic rigor as the hallmark of their schools—felt that the MCAS did not create any extra burdens; rather, it allowed their students to shine.

One principal explained that his school is operated by Edison Schools, Inc., a private management company that provides him with a special curriculum that he said was the product of extensive research. "It's my responsibility to maintain the design,

which involves attending three conferences each year," he said. He mentioned that there is some incongruence between the Edison curriculum and the Massachusetts frameworks: "All Edison schools look the same in some respects—the same design components, the same reading programs, math programs, and similar administrative configurations. Where I get to work is the supplementary materials, the augmentation. The [Edison] curriculum is not made for the MCAS. A lot of what I have to do is look at where the curriculum does not correspond." When asked whether it would be easier to follow the Edison curriculum or the Massachusetts frameworks rather than patching the two together, he replied: "Easier is not what we were going for. It would absolutely not be more effective. The Edison math curriculum is just as appropriate for 8th graders in Texas as California as Massachusetts. What has to happen is that you don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. You just modify the curriculum so it corresponds to the testing date. That's the way it should be."

Organizational Design (Hierarchy and Size)

Each charter school in Massachusetts must be governed by a board of trustees, to which its principal, or occasionally its director (if different from the principal position), reports. Aside from the board, charter schools are free to develop any management structure they choose.

Five of the principals indicated that they had excellent relationships with their boards and felt that their boards were supportive, yet granted them an appropriate amount of leeway in day-to-day management of the school. Of these five, three principals thought that this relationship was not necessarily typical in charter schools. Only one of

the principals was dissatisfied with the board. He said that the board seemed to represent different "interest groups" with competing agendas for the school, and that it was very difficult to move ahead as a result. He also felt that having student representatives on the board had led to too much discussion of matters that should be kept private.

For three principals, the term "charter school" seemed to be synonymous with "small school." "Regular ed can learn two things from charter schools," one pointed out. "That small schools are better, and that the empowerment of teachers is good." Another said: "The problem with a large school is that you just can't get things done that you want to get done as you can with a smaller school."

Several of the principals said that their schools' small size allowed them to eliminate what one of them called "the middle management layer." This meant that teachers took on more administrative duties in the schools, and in many cases were almost like another "board" to which the principal felt accountable. One of the principals, for example, had decided to leave the school a month before the interview took place. She said that the president of the board of trustees decided that they needed to hire a principal quickly before the school year started. She then described the faculty's reaction: "The faculty said that we don't want to do that and we would rather have an interim director and start a nationwide search over the next year. We had a joint meeting with the board and the teachers and out of that meeting we decided to do the year-long search. One of the vet teachers stepped up and will be interim director for a year."

One of the principals who had formerly run a district school said that there was a much better relationship between the administration and the faculty at his school, a relationship that he attributed to the absence of a teachers union. "I was able to make a

significant increase in the standardized test scores and the quality of instruction from a system where teachers are torn between their allegiance to a union that discourages individual hard work, always protecting the weakest teacher by slowing down the best teacher, and the principal. This is not an employment agency but a mission." On the same topic, another principal said that he could call a teacher in and tell him that he is not doing a good job without being concerned that he is going to call the union rep. "Teachers know what their responsibilities are here, and they don't get caught up in all that bureaucratic baloney," he said.

Two of the principals said that schools had reduced administrative capacity but increased responsibility for administrative tasks. One of the former district principals noted that in a charter school "you have the whole marketing piece to deal with," and "no extra staff to handle it."

Accountability

When each of the principals was asked to whom or to what they feel most accountable, answers varied significantly. Two said that they feel accountable to the board of trustees; three said that they feel most accountable to their students; one felt most accountable toward the mission of the school; another felt most accountable toward parents; and another was accountable toward the well-being of his teachers.

Does a strong accountability system limit or propel a principal's autonomy? There is no clear answer. If schools are held accountable in ways that are meaningful to the principal, then a feeling of accountability may drive him to use all of his powers to achieve the desired ends. On the other hand, if a school is held strictly accountable for

performing specified functions, a principal's autonomy can be limited, either intentionally or inadvertently.

There was an overwhelming feeling among the principals that their schools were open to public scrutiny. Three of the principals said that charter schools' MCAS scores were observed especially closely by the public—and that charter detractors were waiting for low scores to declare charter schools a failure. When asked what his biggest job hassle was, one principal responded:

> Accountability up the kazoo. Anything I do I have to make sure it doesn't appear on the front page of the *Boston Globe* the next morning. My test scores drop, they are in the *Globe* tomorrow morning. So is the BPS [Boston Public Schools], but people say 'Charter schools are supposed to be doing this so why aren't they doing it.' I had a bathroom problem and it appeared in the *Globe*. Ever since that day I made sure that everything we did had a high level of perfection to it. All eyes should be on all schools, individually. I believe that you give the principals all the autonomy you want, and now that you got it, you don't perform, you're fired. And guess what? Do you think that people will perform? I think so.

Another principal described how parents constantly visit his school: "Parents can see up close and personal how their kids are being taught. That's the kind of accountability that you can't put a price tag on. Teachers are not inclined to wing it, to fake it, to sidestep it. They come in and do the job every day." Another echoed these thoughts: "We are truly public. Anyone can come to see what we are doing. We want people to see what we are doing."

Two principals mentioned that there was one moment when they had to step back and see what they were achieving: when their charters needed to be renewed. After submitting an application for charter renewal in Massachusetts, each school undergoes a four-day inspection commissioned by the state Department of Education. One recounted

the process: "That was a trip! But it was wonderful. It was thrilling because if you are proud of your school, you love having a group come from outside and scour the school and watch all the classes." The other, however, felt that it was difficult to integrate her school's original mission with a focus on the MCAS that seemed to have become increasingly important.

The principals had differing views as to whether the measures of their performance—particularly the MCAS—in effect dictated how they needed to run their school, thereby limiting their autonomy. One principal, when asked whether accountability limits autonomy, said "No, because I can decide how I am going to reach the goals—whether they be high test scores or anything else." This principal clearly separated the means of running his school, which he had control over, and the ends, which are dictated to some extent by the state Department of Education. Another principal, however, could not make this clear separation in her mind:

> The charter school law described charter schools as "innovative laboratories of reform" and that implied that you had to have autonomy if you are going to be innovative and be a laboratory of reform. It was announced that charter schools would be free from certain regulations and in actuality they are not free from many at all, and especially now they are free from even fewer. Complete freedom would mean not having to hire certified staff [i.e., teachers who have passed a state certification test]...to be able to teach whatever you wanted to teach, however you wanted to teach it, and to assess it however you want to assess it.

Realizing School Goals

Each of the principals was asked whether they had been able to use their autonomy to realize their personal goals for their schools. Six of the principals indicated a direct connection between their charter status and the realization of a school goal; they felt that they had reached a goal that they would not have been able to reach without their charter

status. One of the schools had lengthened its school day by several hours and lengthened the school year by 30 days to ensure that all academic material was fully covered. Another principal said that he had given computers and personal budgets to all the teachers at the school, which allowed consistently excellent instruction. Another argued that, because he had hired teachers without allegiance to the union, he had created a school atmosphere that was more spirited and supportive. Yet another, whose primary goal was the creation of a school that opened its doors to its local community and appreciated its community, was able to hire some community members without certification as teachers. Another, who aimed to create an environment where "solid foundations" could be learned, said that she was able to implement multi-age classes, project-based learning, peer coaching, portfolio assessment, and block scheduling in nine days, a process that "would have taken a decade to get going in a district." Two of the principals believed that ultimately their schools were no different from district schools under a superintendent who believed in school site management.

Conclusion: The Potential of Autonomous Principals in Charter Schools

Although nearly all the principals interviewed felt that charter schools were not completely autonomous, it is clear that freedom was what they savored most in the experience of running a charter school. The rhetoric of autonomy, freedom, free choice, and individual creation permeated many of their comments. Perhaps one principal put it best when he described the difference between being a regular district principal and a charter school principal:

> Here's what happens in regular public schools. I have everyone on the planet telling me what I can and can't do, and before I know it I am coming to school dressed looking like a clown. The superintendent told me to wear a striped tie. The director told me to wear a red polka-dotted shirt. This person told me to wear sneakers, that person told me to wear shoes. You know what I am saying? It's too many directions and it's no longer my school anymore—it's everybody else's school… But here, I built this school. And if it crumbles, it's my fault. I want to be responsible. Darn straight I like to be responsible.

Charter schools are now on a cusp; they will either be deemed another education reform fad and wither away, or they will become a more-or-less permanent part of the public education landscape. These interviews suggest that increased principal autonomy in charter schools seems to be working well enough in its early stages. In order for this force to drive real improvements in education, however, it will need to have three qualities: The ability to endure, the ability to cultivate new resources, and the ability to fuel results.

The ability to endure. When the principals described what they liked most about charter schools, few spoke of specific features of the state charter law, but rather, favored

intangibles that created a positive school culture among teachers and students—what one of the principals called the "zeitgeist" of charter schools. Several saw these intangibles as an outgrowth of the fact that their staffs view their school as a blank slate, and that they themselves were creators and entrepreneurs. This feeling can significantly affect teachers' work ethics, their capacities to innovate, and the whole environment of a school.

None of the charter schools involved in this study was more than seven years old, and many of the principals were themselves the founders of the school and had hired all its teachers. Will charter principals be able to see their schools as blank slates, and see themselves as founding entrepreneurs, if they assume leadership of a school that has existed for 50 years and inherit a faculty with some members who have outlasted three principals? When asked this question, one of the principals said "charter school principals will always be able to change what is not working." Charter schools undoubtedly benefit from a feeling of newness and freedom from inherited orders; if they are to work in the long run, charter law must guard principals' abilities to change what is not working frequently and freely. Specifically, principals must maintain the authority to hire whom they choose and to fire mediocre teachers. Also, the charter enterprise will probably work best if always in a state of flux, with schools frequently opening to replace ones that were not performing well, allowing the drama of invention to be restaged over and over.

The ability to cultivate new resources. Massachusetts law limits the number of charter schools to ensure that they make up a small percentage of the total number of

schools in the state. The dynamics of a charter system on the margin of the dominant district school system are quite different than the dynamics of a system where all schools are charter schools. With charters operating on the margin, there will always be "creaming" arguments against them. Regulators in most states have gone to great lengths to ensure that charter schools do not pull the most capable students from the public school system. However, several of the principals remarked that charter schools are able to attract the best public school teachers. Furthermore, all but two of the principals described their decision to enter charter schools as a product of some dissatisfaction with their experience in regular district schools. In this way, charter schools could be said to be creaming those who see potential for reform in the district schools, and are in some ways using district school failures as platforms for their own success.

To the extent that charter schools do pull resources away from district schools, there may be no net gain for public education as a whole—charter schools may perform better than district schools, but only because they are making district schools slightly worse. If charter schools are to create a net gain for public education, then they must use existing resources more efficiently than district schools, and, most importantly, they must cultivate new resources. For example, charter schools can attract teachers who otherwise might not be teachers at all, they can contract with companies that districts would not think to contract with, they can experiment with teaching practices, curricula, and uses of technology that are difficult to implement in district schools. These things will only come to pass with the right people leading charter schools, and given the right amount of autonomy to pursue their educational missions.

The ability to fuel results. Autonomy is only beneficial when someone uses it effectively. The seven Commonwealth charter school principals interviewed here faced the same charter law and had the same freedoms, but they used them in vastly different ways with respect to hiring teachers, developing curricula, and creating novel school features. Autonomy will not in and of itself create better schools—in fact, it can create additional hassles that slow schools down—unless there are school principals who can see the link between the freedom they have and the possibility of realizing educational goals.

The key question is not whether charter schools are a sound educational model, but whether there will be a supply of capable leaders who are ready and willing to run them. The great charter school pay-off will only come when we join laws granting broad freedom with leaders ready to take advantage of that autonomy in daring and creative ways.

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